

Online Learning Communities for Global Courses

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Introduction

Any new medium or method of doing things is always subject to more hype and higher criteria for success than what it is replacing. For example, there is little research or consideration given to how much students are learning in lectures, how many have fallen asleep or are daydreaming about something entirely irrelevant to the content of what is being taught. Yet online learning is often considered unsuccessful if less than 85% of students are actively participating, if students are logging on less than three times a week, or if less than several hundred messages are generated in each conference. Of course if these criteria were adapted and applied to face-to-face lectures, the lecture method of learning would undoubtedly be classified as unsuccessful.

It is hardly surprising that students who have been indoctrinated throughout years of schooling to sit quietly and listen, do not suddenly have the skills, the motivation and the confidence to take part in deep, meaningful discussions about course ideas, just because the technology is available to facilitate it online. Without a doubt, many students will need a lot of hand-holding, encouragement and solid support to become confident participators in online courses. In essence, this is about giving students the opportunity to take control of their learning.

I have experimented with many ways of trying to achieve 100% participation in the online courses I have designed and tutored. No matter what level of support I have offered or what combinations of stick and carrot, coercion and laissez-faire, I have never managed it. In the end, I have come to see my role as offering opportunities—the best and most attractive I can manage. Our students are all adults and if they choose not to avail themselves of the benefits of interaction, it is not my duty to insist. However, where we have had considerable success is in converting large numbers of ‘undecided’ or reluctant participators to see the value of online interaction and to actively engage in collaborative and peer learning activities. In short, I have ceased to regard 100% participation as a standard of quality or measure of success. Winning hearts and minds seems to me a more worthy target.

In terms of quality, I consider that best practice involves evidence of students commenting on each others’ ideas, reflecting on the course content and engaging in well argued debates about the subject matter. Online interaction facilitates three aspects of this form of deep-level learning:

- (1) Opportunity to express one’s own ideas and perspectives
- (2) Vehicle for receiving feedback on those ideas—in this case, by both tutors and fellow learners

- (3) Encouragement to revise one's thoughts and opinions on the basis of feedback.

Evidence of these three practices should, I think, be the criteria for judging the quality of online conferences.

The Context of Online Learning

There is no doubt that some online learning contexts are very much more conducive to success than others. In general, the more mature the learner, the more willingly they adapt to the demands of online learning. Students, especially adults, and more especially still, professional adults, already at Masters level, are easier to work with online than undergraduates, the unemployed, those who have not taken any formal education or training for many years or those who lack confidence in themselves as learners. IT experience also helps and of course previous online experience is even more helpful. Students who are used to collaborating with peers, participating in seminars and discussions, whether in formal education or in the workplace, generally adapt quickly to online learning.

What does that mean for using online learning with less able, less confident and less advanced learners? They need much more 'hand-holding', more scaffolding to help them to become independent learners, more encouragement to participate online and more structuring so that they know exactly what they are to do.

The course design also plays a major role in creating successful online learning conferences. For example, the extent to which the online element of the course has been integrated with the rest of the course and particularly with the assessment of the course will affect participation rates. Is the conferencing element voluntary or compulsory? Is it compulsory but actually quite marginal? Students can spot things that only appear to be obligatory and will avoid all but the essentials, especially if they are busy or strategic learners. If the online interaction plays a less than significant role in the course, participation will always hover around 50%.

Another aspect of the context relates to the amount of face-to-face contact the students have. Where students of an online course are seeing each other regularly e.g. on campus, it can be difficult or seem artificial to communicate electronically. However, if students never meet, it is difficult to overcome shyness and lack of confidence about communicating with people in a 'public' conference. The ideal seems to be a face-to-face meeting at the beginning of the course so everyone can get to know each other, and perhaps another one half way through the course, depending on how long the course is, to work together collaboratively in a real-time environment. However, there are many successful courses which manage without any face-to-face meetings—they simply need to structure the introduction of the course more carefully and allow time for students to build up a rapport with each

other. Equally, online courses in North America are attracting more than half their students from full time campuses, as young people are employed at least part-time to pay their fees and want to finish their degree in as short a time as possible. Online education has effectively broken down the distinction between campus and distance education.

Cross-cultural Online Communities

When the student community is composed of learners from many different countries, there are simultaneously great benefits and great difficulties. The benefits lie in the kind of peer learning that is generated in collaborative activities and discussions. Course designers need to build in opportunities to exploit the multiple perspectives and cultural differences which such a mix produces. They also need to be especially sensitive in avoiding jargon, in-jokes and other nationalistic references. Activities can be designed which pair students from different cultures, and assignments can offer opportunities for students to apply course issues to their own context. Tutors need to encourage non-native students to ask when they don't understand messages—often by asking themselves when messages are not clear. It is also necessary for all instructions, student guides, details about assessment etc. to be more explicit and more detailed than might otherwise be the case. Things that are obvious to students who have been through the national education system, will not necessarily be obvious to students at a distance and from foreign systems.

The greatest difficulty usually lies in persuading, encouraging and supporting a cross-cultural student body to interact together. What commonly happens is that the Western educated students dominate discussions and other students feel increasingly marginalised. One of the best ways of preventing this situation from developing (and it is much harder to correct than to prevent in the first place!) is to start students off in very small groups (of 2 to 4 students), with very defined tasks.

Ice-breaking activities at the beginning of the course—if well designed—can help to set the tone and expectations for developing a strong online community (Salmon, 2002). I personally do not favour activities for the sake of working together; rather, all activities, even ice-breaking activities should focus on course content or process. For example, I like an introductory 'game' which involves students exploring the whole site: finding particular readings, using the online databases, testing various features of the platform etc.

Online Assessment

In my own experience, integrating the online work of the course with the assessment of the course is one of the best ways of establishing an online community that is purposeful, collaborative and effective. I am not referring to web-based multiple choice sorts of assessment, which have other uses, but to a range of essay type assignments that have been adapted to the online environment.

A simple division of the whole category of online assessment strategies is into those which produce individual pieces of assessed work and those which involve collaborative activities and / or a collaboratively produced component of assessed work.

A common form of individual online assessment is the student-produced web site. The benefits of this approach derive from the public nature of the assessed work—whether assignments are available just to the other students on the course, or on an open web site.

The practice of students writing only for the eyes of their instructor or marker is surely one of the most ill-conceived aspects of current assessment processes. The web has legitimated the concept of everyman as publisher. There are a number of ways in which this can be applied to assessment:

- Assignments from previous years can be made available in a digital repository which becomes part of the course resources to be drawn upon by subsequent students.
- Current assignments can be accessible to students after the submission deadline—with or without grades and with or without the feedback from the instructor.
- Assigning students the task of commenting on previous students' work makes an excellent activity which gives practice in applying the ideas and values of the discipline to specific instantiations of them.
- Student-produced web sites can be assigned in subjects where web skills could not be expected or required, by the provision of a template which obviates the need for html experience.
- The web can be used to deliver model answers and to help students see alternative approaches to written work.
- Online interaction with the tutor can be used for students to discuss their assessment criteria as they work on their assignment.

An example of an individual process that capitalises on communication is the following: students submit a written assignment which is marked by the instructor and put into a file area. For the next assignment, students are asked to revise their first assignment on the basis of feedback from the tutor and from other students, and in addition to provide comments on at least two of the assignments of their peers. The benefits of this approach are that it provides an opportunity for the learner to build on the feedback received and to iteratively refine a piece of their own work. Second, it provides practice in assessing work in the discipline area and in offering constructive feedback (for other examples, see Bos et al, 1996; Davies and Berrow, 1998).

Collaborative forms of assessment have a much longer pedigree than online learning. However, the facilities of the web have certainly provided added impetus for various collaborative practices and the whole online environment has endorsed a more community-centred approach to learning (See for

example, Collis, 1998; Fieldy, 1999 and McConnell, 1999). There are two aspects of collaborative assessment:

- Assignments which require students to work together on the content and, usually, to submit a jointly developed piece of work
- Collaborative processes of grading student work.
- Examples of jointly produced assignments can involve any of the following:
- Part of the assignment being produced collaboratively and part e.g. the introduction and conclusion being supplied by the individual student—hence giving incentive for both individual and team work
- A group submission in which each individual has taken a specific part identified for the marker
- A collaboratively produced piece of work where the individual inputs cannot be distinguished.

There is a growing literature on the benefits, pitfalls and critical theory underpinning these different approaches to collaborative assessment.

In adult and professional education there has been significant interest in developing more participative approaches to assessment, whether peer (carried out by fellow students), collaborative (jointly evaluated by learners and the tutor) or consultative (collectively between self, peer and tutor but with ultimate responsibility resting with the tutor). These developments are particularly appropriate in the case of participative courses which are designed more generally to provide students with opportunities for influencing—for example—the content of the curriculum, the educational methods used, or the choice of topics for assignments. (Trehan and Reynolds, 2001, p279-280)

Feedback from students usually indicates considerable disquiet about collaborative marks because of the problem of unequal contributions. A range of solutions have been sought to address this problem. See for example, Boud, 1981, 1989; Cunningham, 1991; Somervell, 1993 for pre-web discussions, and Collis 1999, and Freeman and McKenzie, 2000 for online applications.

The strongest message from the early adopters of online assessment is that students—especially undergraduates—need support and encouragement in tackling new concepts of assessment. Students generally find courses with an online activity-based pedagogy more demanding than traditional courses, as such courses usually expect a more student-centred and independent approach to learning. If activities are to be a central part of the course philosophy, then their completion must be integrated with the assessment.

An Example Online Course

The Institute of Educational Technology (IET) is one of the faculties of the UK Open University (OU). Its Masters in Open and Distance Education consists of four courses, any three of which constitute the degree, two a diploma and one a certificate. All of the courses are tutored online, using a Web-based conferencing system and have access to an online library of full text, copyright-cleared papers and urls related to the courses. There are roughly 150 students registered across all courses and while half of these are UK students, the other half are from all over the world.

What have we learned about online course design?

In the very first online courses we ran (short, professional updating courses), the students had an optional face-to-face meeting at the beginning and the rest of the course consisted of four-week blocks with set readings and an open discussion conference. What happened was that the most confident, 'talkative' and literate participants dominated the discussion areas to the exclusion of the more tentative thinkers, those with less easy online access and those who were so busy they couldn't see where to make their contributions quickly and effectively. While the discussion which did take place online amongst the tutors and the major contributors was outstanding, it was hardly inclusive. We could see the potential, but needed a strategy for allowing all to participate. Essentially, we needed better course design.

We began experimenting with smaller group sizes and with set activities, giving everyone a specific task and an area of the system in which to discuss their findings. In addition, we allowed those with the time, access and enthusiasm to participate across any of the sub groups if they wanted. This provided a solution to the following problems:

- that there is a wide range of abilities, interests and time in which people will engage in online activities, requiring different options for different participants
- that simply providing the opportunity to interact does not guarantee good interaction; most learners need a structure and a task within which to orient their contributions
- that an overload of messages is inevitable in the online environments unless it is managed through good course design.

We developed the concept of an online debate, choosing carefully a polemical statement which contests central course issues, which has good resources available to substantiate both sides of the argument, and which is significant enough to warrant discussion over a three week period. We assign specific roles to each person in the group (which could be as small as four, or as large as 10) such as: moderator of the discussion, proposer of the motion, opposer of the motion, documentalists (who sum-

marise relevant ideas from the set readings), researchers (who go and find relevant papers and resources on the Web), commenters (whose specific task is to discuss the ideas put forth by the opposer and proposer), and finally rapporteur (who is responsible for summarising the discussion at the end of three weeks).

Although we have designed the most 'online' of the courses, H802, with set activities of various sorts for the first three quarters of the course, there is flexibility within this for individual tutors to adapt and implement the structures to suit their own way of working. Tutors can decide how many small groups to form for various tasks, how to arrange who does the tasks and to some extent how the activities should be carried out.

Our experience of getting online courses started and participants confident about entering messages and collaborating in group work, has led us to begin H802 with email collaboration rather than conference messaging. This kind of 'gentle' introduction may cease to be necessary in time as more and more people have experience with online learning. However, we have found that novices appreciate developing their virtual team working skills in small groups of three using email before moving on to larger groups communicating more publicly in a conference.

We use the conference structure to help with the pacing of the course. We usually begin each block with a new, blank set of conferences. Of course the old tutor group messages remain, but the new conferences (with their associated Web pages of advice, resources and orientation to activities) help students to move on from the mass of messages from the previous block and to start afresh with the next block of work. Each sub group has their own conference thread for discussion of the current activity, and while they can follow the messages of other sub groups and can even contribute to the sub groups of other tutors, this is optional. From a perusal of the history function within the conference system, which indicates who has read any particular message, it is apparent that over half the students read some messages from other groups, and occasionally a student will comment outside their own group. In some activities the sub groups will have different topics; in other activities the groups will all be doing the same work. Students can expand the course by following several topics, or where the same topic is discussed by all, they can see the variety of ways in which different people tackle the question. This facility—this depth and breadth as it were—seems to work well as a way of streamlining student participation at the same time as providing opportunity for individual difference.

What have we learned about nurturing online community?

Evaluations of many OU courses using conferencing have shown implicitly that if we expect students to participate in online discussions, there must be a corresponding reduction of other learning material. On one of the courses, we wanted to explore the value of online learning by reducing pre-

prepared materials to a minimum and concentrating course design and student energies on what can be gained from purposeful, resourced and tutor-supported online activity. Consequently, three out of the four blocks of the course have no printed OU material except for a Study and Assignment Guide. There is, however, a set book for each block, an online library of full text papers, an audiotape and a CD-ROM. The fourth block reverts to 'traditional OU' mode with a tailor made unit and a set of readings. These contain much of the theoretical background underpinning the practical experience provided in the first three blocks. Despite this drastic reduction in the visible 'stuff' of the course, feedback confirms that the course is quite demanding with a high workload.

What we have found is that this mixture of intense collaboration tailing off into traditional, more individual study has worked astonishingly well. The students, many of whom became total converts to the value of collaborative learning in the early stages of the course, were definitely flagging by about four months into the course. The term 'collaboration fatigue' was coined to express their combination of appreciation but overload with the demands of collaborating online. The problems are:

- that the structure and timetable imposed by collaborative learning makes the course very much less flexible than traditional print-based distance education
- that the schedules of busy professional people who are attracted to this programme mean that holidays, family crises, sudden job commitments are a major hindrance to regular, sustained participation in group activities
- ironically, that students definitely experience more guilt and stress about failing their colleagues in collaborative work than their tutors in individual work!

Collaborative work is definitely more time-consuming, more stressful and less flexible than individual work. However, in many ways it is more rewarding. The benefits of collaborative activities as the core content of the course are:

- that students can engage in authentic tasks directly relevant to their work, in this case as educators and ICT specialists
- that the whole, usually in the form of a group report, is more than the sum of the parts which are the individual contributions
- that the individual expertise of the students is brought into the teaching / learning environment to the benefit of all concerned
- that larger, more comprehensive tasks can be undertaken through the combined efforts of a group
- that the burden of supporting and motivating students can be shared by all the students, not just the tutor.

Our original idea of changing the composition of the groups after each task, so that students would have an opportunity to work with other participants on the course, was shown to be a short-

sighted aim. The value of building up a working relationship within a group was shown to be more important than experiencing the variation of working with a wide range of people. Currently, we begin in very small groups, then combine several groups to form a larger group but maintain these larger groups through several activities.

We have had to manage absentee-ism throughout the activities by being flexible, swapping people into less critical roles, and encouraging team members to step in for absent colleagues. The most important thing is to establish a system of notification about periods of absence. Increasingly, however, the presence of cybercafes in even the remotest parts of the world, is easing this problem and many H802 students have carried on their duties as they go off to conferences and even on holidays. Because of the focus of this course—the design and development of open and distance courses, the very problem of absenteeism is relevant to the discussions.

Despite the benefits of collaborative work, we have come to see that ‘while some is good, more is not necessarily better’—even on a postgraduate programme such as this. It is simply too intense, too inflexible and too demanding.

What have we learned about cross-cultural online learning?

It is predictable that students using English as a second language may not be as articulate and as willing to take part in online interaction as mother tongue users. On some courses we have had almost a 50-50 split between UK students and foreign students, although many non-UK students are still English mother tongue. However, there are enough second language users that they are not an oddity. This helps in the general integration and normalising of the foreign students. Grammatical and spelling mistakes are an accepted fact of online interaction even amongst English speakers, and comprehensibility is the major focus in reduced bandwidths, not correctness. So, although the tutor needs to be specially attuned to the needs of foreign speakers, on the whole communication has not been a significant issue.

More problematic is the marking of assignments in which the level of English is not commensurate with post-graduate writing. This situation is not unique to global courses and has to be faced even on UK-based courses. In particularly bad cases, we recommend that the student find an English mother tongue friend to help with the final versions of their assignments before they are submitted.

A non-British orientation to higher education study is a more complex difficulty because the tutor must be aware of his or her own biases in marking the assignment or commenting on students’ messages. On a programme such as this, which is centrally concerned with teaching and learning, it is even more important to consider the cultural differences which undoubtedly exist and which operate

at a very subtle level in how students present their ideas, how they express them and how they tackle activities and assignments. The MA is founded very squarely in a Western, 'constructivist learning' understanding of higher education, no matter what references and readings we provide to non-Western writers. Many learners, even those from continental Western Europe, have been imbued with a teacher-centred approach to education, which tends to produce a less critical, less interactive and more deferential learner. We can only try to maintain an open attitude to other approaches, to culturally induced misunderstandings and to treat each student as an individual.

Following a research project into the cross-cultural dimensions of our Masters Programme (Goodfellow et al., 2001), we developed a set of preparatory web pages, initially to help non-native students understand some of the tacit conventions of studying online. This consisted of three separate sections:

- A glossary of terms—the kinds of terms that are commonly used in online discussions (for example, CMC for computer conferencing, ftf for face-to-face)
- A set of materials about online interaction—testimonials from previous non-native students documenting how they came to value online discussion, how they realised that they didn't have to be 'right' and to use correct English, how they came to understand critical argument
- Advice, anecdotes and guidance about writing essays—using the marking guidelines to define the structure and scope of the essay, interpreting essay questions etc.

The materials were multi-media, interactive and intended to be personal and supportive, rather than authoritarian and heavy.

What have we learned about assessment for the online environment?

Assessment is another area of course design which we are convinced needs to be re-thought for the online environment. A number of innovative steps have been taken already on other OU courses regarding joint assignments, collaborative projects and online assessments (MacDonald et al., 1999 and Thorpe, 1998). We wanted to build on these by integrating assessment more directly into the online activities and into the collaborative discussions. Our thinking is that assessment can be used as a way of validating the importance of contributing to discussions and to team activities, and to encourage students to view assessment as a summary of their work rather than an addition to it.

On some assignments, we have allotted as much as 30% of the marks for students' use of ideas from conference messages (their own and other students'). Some assignments are a 'write-up' of the collaborative activity they have just carried out; others are an application of the course activities to their own institutional context.

While it is undoubtedly the case that we have achieved our aim of validating collaborative work and online discussion, there are still some students who have difficulty grasping how to use ideas and extracts from conference messages in their assignments and a few who continue to resist this pressure to participate in online discussions.

Another area we would like to tackle is that of peer marking, because we are convinced of the value of students' reading and assessing the work of their colleagues. At the very least, we would like to design a system whereby students would be producing assignments not as a closed interaction with the tutor, but as a form of communication to their peers. One possibility is a file area that is closed until the student submits their assignment; then the student can read the work of other students. We would like to take advantage of the quality and effort which assessed work represents and turn it into a learning resource, by building activities around the reading and commenting on other students' assignments. Other Masters level courses do implement this (McConnell, 1999) though it is very time consuming and requires real dedication on the part of tutors to sustain it.

Summary of Findings

Our experience leads to the following three conclusions:

(1) Establishing a non-threatening online environment

It would be difficult to over-estimate how diffident even the most professional learners can be on entering the online environment. Consequently it is important to start slowly with 'icebreaker' activities, in pairs using email or in very small groups. The tutor's input is vital at the beginning in establishing this welcoming environment—by replying personally to each student when they first enter a message.

(2) Structuring activities

While social areas are a vital part of establishing a friendly feeling, it is equally important to identify the working areas and what is voluntary and what is obligatory. Busy learners need to easily find out what they are meant to be doing at each section of the course. Free-for-all discussions usually lead to domination by the most articulate; therefore, structured activities and assignments either collaborative or individual, make it easy for students to make effective inputs in short study sessions.

Timed activities help students to pace their work e.g. a two-week group project ending with a group presentation or a three-week debate. Closing conferences and opening new ones for each block of the course also helps students to keep current. Real-time events maintain motivation and group bonding. Clarity and completeness of instructions e.g. about assignments, activities and readings are critical to building students' trust and reducing unnecessary messaging. This is more diffi-

cult than it appears, as the networked environment propagates mis-information, anxiety and doubt very quickly.

(3) Successful Online Learning Communities

IET's online Masters courses are very successful in generating deep-level learning, reflective interaction and collaborative work, in short, online learning communities. We attribute this to good course design and excellent tutoring. However, we are working with outstanding students in the first place: most are professionals, graduates, educators and trainers already aware of their skills as learners. They enjoy good access to the web, often from home and from work. As online education spreads, many more students will have these same attributes and hence make successful conferencing the norm.

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